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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000595

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AA](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH: MORE CONCERNED ABOUT
RUSSIANS THAN TITLE OF ECUMENICITY

REF: A. ISTANBUL 238
[1](#)B. ANKARA 1373
[1](#)C. ISTANBUL 381

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I congratulated the United States on the election of its new president, discussed the Patriarchate's potential reacquisition of the Buyukada Orphanage as well as hoped for reforms from the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and his views on the developing relationship between Armenia and Turkey during a November 24 meeting with Consul General. Bartholomew also commented on what he perceives to be the political implications of recent requests by the Russian Patriarch to place orthodox priests at Russian diplomatic posts in Turkey. Notably, he also said he does not see a need for a discussion of the GOT's recognition of the ecumenical status of the Patriarchate and that the GOT does not impose legal restrictions on his use of that title. End Summary.

Future of Buyukada Orphanage in Hands of ECHR

[1](#)2. (SBU) Responding to a question about the July 8 European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgment in favor of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and against the GOT in a case concerning the Patriarchate's title to a former orphanage that had been annulled by the Turkish authorities (Ref C), Bartholomew pointed out that the decision was unanimous and included a vote by the Turkish member of the court. He explained that by not responding within the three months provided, the GOT forfeited its opportunity to appeal the ECHR decision. The Patriarchate will now present a case to the ECHR seeking the return of the property rather than monetary compensation from the GOT. Bartholomew said the Patriarchate will propose that the former orphanage be converted into a facility to house two centers: one for environmental studies and the other for interfaith dialogue. Strasbourg will consider the proposal when making its decision regarding the property.

[1](#)3. (C) Responding to the Consul General's inquiry about whether he remained optimistic about the new Greek Archbishop Ieronymos' role in improving relations with the government of Greece, Bartholomew called the Archbishop a good man who loves and respects the Patriarchate. He said the Muslims in Greece "must be happy" because the Government of Greece pays great attention to minorities and recently forgave \$20 million of Muslim foundations' debt. Bartholomew estimated the number of Muslims in Greece at 130,000, but refused to make comparisons between the populations of Muslims of Thrace and the Greeks of Turkey. (Comment: Historically, the GOT has cited the need for improved treatment of the Muslim ("Turkish") minority in Thrace before it will consider taking

reciprocal actions regarding Halki Seminary or other rights for the Greek Orthodox population in Turkey. End comment.)

Waiting for Reform Action by AKP

14. (C) Bartholomew acknowledged that the favorable court decision for the AKP in July has not resulted in concrete progress with regard to the reopening of the Halki Seminary or reacquisition of property from the GOT. Despite this lack of action, Bartholomew said he still has hopes for positive results for religious minorities. "We count always on the goodwill of the present government. I can say that all minorities feel that the present AKP government is better than a CHP government." Other parties are courting the minority vote as well. He explained that in the run up to the municipal elections, the candidates from every party generally visit the Patriarchate to pull in the minority vote. The CG observed that Nur Memecan is the AKP MP currently responsible for the islands on which Halki Seminary and other Patriarchate property is located. Remarking on Memecan's understanding the importance of interfaith dialogue and appreciation for freedom of religion given her time in the United States, the CG recommended that the Patriarchate contact her about its concerns.

Armenia and Visiting Cardinal Kaspar's Comments on Genocide

15. (C) Bartholomew expressed happiness about the developing dialogue between the governments of Turkey (GOT) and Armenia. While in Armenia recently, he met privately with Armenian

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President Sargsyan to congratulate him on his successful meeting with the Turkish President Gul. He encouraged him to continue the relationship, saying he hoped the two countries would exchange diplomats soon. In the ongoing discussion related to the tragic events of 1915, the Turkish media recently aired comments by Cardinal Kaspar, president of the Pontifical Council, in which he emphasized that the Holy See regards Armenian allegations of genocide as reality. Noting that Kaspar will be attending the Feast of St. Andrew at the Patriarchate on November 30, Bartholomew said Kaspar may "face some difficulties" during his visit but does not believe extra security will be necessary. (Note: The Turkish press has not reported on Kaspar's participation in the feast.)

Pan-Orthodox Synod and "Expansionist" Requests by Russian Patriarch

15. (SBU) The Patriarchate is participating in the preparations for a pan-orthodox synod, and Bartholomew said the planning committee will meet in Geneva in March 2009. The committee has yet to set a date for the synod, but Bartholomew commented on the planning process' positive progress toward unity in the orthodox world.

16. (C) Following a private meeting with the Russian Patriarch in Kiev, Bartholomew said the relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church has improved but described some recent challenges. The Russian Patriarch requested permission to appoint a priest to the Russian Consulate General in Istanbul, a position that would provide diplomatic status for the priest. Bartholomew responded to the patriarch saying that the Russians at the Consulate can instead attend mass at the Russian Church in Karakoy, a neighborhood in central Istanbul. The Russian Patriarch also requested to post a priest to the Russian Embassy in Ankara - a request Bartholomew said he also denied, noting that "at the Embassy they would be more than priests and would use their diplomatic status and religion for other purposes in the spirit of expansionism and imperialism." He said he informed the Holy See of the Russian Patriarch's requests.

No Need for Discussion on Ecumenical Status

¶17. (C) The AKP has not engaged in a discussion about the ecumenical status of the patriarchate, according to Bartholomew, and he explained that he does not see a need for such a discussion. He related that Greek PM Karamanlis asked about the GOT's recognition of the Patriarch's ecumenicity and both PM Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ali Babacan said it was a matter concerning the Orthodox Church and not the GOT.

According to Bartholomew, he uses the ecumenical title within the Church because it comes from the 6th Century, and emphasized that there is no practical impact of the Government's perspective and no legal prohibition on his use of the title. The important part, he contended, is that he is recognized as the Ecumenical Patriarch by his peers in orthodoxy following the tradition of his predecessors.

¶18. (C) Comment: The GOT's continued refusal to open Halki Seminary despite conciliatory actions by the GOG involving its Muslim minority-indicated by PM Erdogan in prior comments as a prerequisite for GOT action - shows that additional variables influence its decision to keep the seminary closed.

(Bartholomew invited the Consul General to visit Halki during the Patriarch's Kurban Bayram stay there.) However, Bartholomew points to areas of cooperation under the AKP, including their shared preference that the issue of the Patriarchate's ecumenicity be kept out of the political realm. Addressing issues such as the ecumenical status would draw attention away from needed progress in areas where political discussion would be beneficial, namely the reopening of Halki Seminary. End Comment.

WIENER